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AUTHOR Burn, Jean Peges
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ABSTRACT

The art of puppetry is defined and techniques for using puppetry to improve self-concept of the exceptional (handicapped or gifted) child are explained. Definitions of puppetry are summarized into three basic concepts: puppets are symbols, non-persons; puppetry is a two-way communication medium; and improved feelings of self-worth may be internalized with this technique. The educational use of puppetry is discussed in terms of structure (consistency of the puppet's personality), expanding the concept (such as addition of new characters), imagination and creative thinking, role-playing, and as an historical educational tool (including puppetry for language arts enrichment). (SBH)

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ATLANTA, GEORGIA

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PUPPETRY:

IMPROVING THE SELF-CONCEPT

OF THE EXCEPTIONAL CHILD

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BY: JEAN REGES BURN

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The self-concept of exceptional individuals is a component part of their uniqueness. How they see themselves and others, their fears, indecisiveness or decisiveness, self-esteem and attitudes intrinsically affects the extrinsic characteristics of exceptional individuals. It affects all the domains of the individual (biological, cognitive, affective and social) and is a major impediment or help in the development of the individual as a fully functioning person.

The use of puppetry to improve self-concept is one way of aiding the exceptional individual to internalize improved feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, self-motivation and self-acceptance.

Puppetry Defined

Not to be confused with doll playing which involves intimate action only between the doll and the person, (Baird, p. 13), puppetry is a two-way communication that involves a sender and a receiver. (The puppeteer and the audience.)

The Puppet As a Non-Person

Most important, the puppet is a non-person. It is a simplification of whatever it represents. It is a representation of an idea by an inanimate object. It can be a mask, a wooden figure of a man, an animal, a handkerchief, a potatoe, a stuffed toy - no matter what it is or what it represents, it is still not a person.

Because self-concept is a form of perception, and puppets are non-persons, puppets may be used as a communication channel to allow a variety of feelings to flow in an acceptable way. The onus is on the puppet and not the person holding the puppet which allows two things to happen:

1. Feelings are flowing through the puppet (the sender).
2. The sender is becoming aware of the impact of these feelings on the perceiver (the audience).

Jim Henson, the originator of the Muppets featured on Sesame Street explains:

I think in general with puppets, it's a way of seeing things, and children can identify with the situation, because the puppets are working symbolically. It's not the same thing as if there were an actor there; if there was an actor there you are really looking at another person...but if you put a puppet in there - it's not a real person, so what you are really doing is dealing with the situation itself. You are really simplifying down and dealing symbolically with the situation. It's a purer form of seeing something. And that's why it works for children, it works for adults as well.

The characters of Oscar and Big Bird were designed specifically to symbolize negative feelings that children often experience. Through these puppets, the objective is to allow these feelings to show openly and without guilt. (Henson, 1977)

It appears that Sesame Street has had immeasurable impact on the minds of the younger American public. This impact cannot be ignored. Sesame Street is in it's eighth year of production and is here to stay. As long as the public is viewing television, we can expect Sesame Street to continue to mold young minds. The producers estimate that a child watches it for 3 to 4 years.

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Responding to criticisms of the show, the producers are changing some aspects of it. The curriculum is being expanded beyond numbers to deal with family issues, ecology, safety, nutrition, and mental retardation.

One criticism has been aimed at parents themselves who, according to the New York Times:

...tend to entrust children to "Sesame Street" as if it were an ideal baby sitter: resourceful, instructional and reliable. It is, however, not human. And as with most educational shows, youngsters seem to benefit from it more if parents are there watching it, talking about it. (Colorado Springs Sun, 12/7/76)

Live classroom puppetry is not the same thing as television puppetry because television is a one-way communicator. The audience receives the messages but is not required to give anything back. The designers of Sesame Street are sensitive to this. Responses are coaxed from the viewers (i.e.- Which of these things is not like the others?)

In a chapter entitled "The Brain Tomorrow" from his book The Living Brain, W. Grey Walter states:

A passive solitary child gazing at the screen of a television receiver amuses only itself - the need to gaze does not promote or evoke habits of creativeness or generosity... the more artistic expression comes to depend on special technical devices, the more restricted is participation in it. Habits of play that depend upon mechanised art and professional sport have no need for private dreams and make-believe. (p. 268)

Walter devotes several pages to the dilemma of Western education resulting from a mechanized civilization. Noting that our whole system of civilized life is dependant on communication, he warns that most devices for entertainment do not lend themselves to two-way operations. (p.267)

Summary of Definitions

It has been established that:

1. Puppets are symbols, non-persons.
2. Puppetry is a two-way communication medium.
3. Improved feelings of self-worth may be internalized by using this technique.

Adapting Puppetry to the Classroom

Puppetry is adaptable to many categories of exceptionality. The research presented here is not confined to one category. The three concepts stated above may be adapted to each unique setting. It is hoped that individuals will draw upon their own propensities to interpret the medium for particular needs.

Puppet Techniques

It is possible that what might work for the gifted and talented might not succeed with mentally retarded students. Equally possible is the realization that what is appropriate for the learning disabled classroom student might not be appropriate for some physically handicapped students.

The individual teacher will have to think the process through and adapt it to their particular educational specifications.

There are dozens of books available on the technology of making and using puppets. A comprehensive bibliography may be obtained from the organization: Puppeteers of America (see: Special Annotation).

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Consistency as Structure

Educators know that in some areas of exceptionality structure is emphasized. As related to puppets, structure can exist in the consistency of the personality of the puppet, the time it is used, and the superstructure of action chosen by the teacher or whoever uses the puppet.

A simple way to commence would be to introduce one special puppet that is contained in their own special "habitat".

Hypothetical examples:

1. Ecology - A beaver puppet in his own "den".
2. Social Behavior - A puppet character who lives in their own "house" (wooden box converted into a miniature stage or house).
3. Language Arts - A favorite puppet character who emerges from a suitcase. Back of suitcase doubles as a platform or stage.

After students become familiar with the personality of the one puppet, they can depend upon the puppet to be a constant. Personality weaknesses and strengths emerge in consistent patterns. Students begin to feel comfortable with the puppet character.

Experience has proved that students respond well to a special time for puppetry. For example, five minutes during morning opening time. The puppet could be responsible for giving announcements, outlining the day, activities, weather or simply talking.

Consistent puppet time will underline needed structure. It will establish intangible parameters which will control the medium. A "hit or miss" approach to using puppetry in the classroom has the potential of being chaotic.

Spontaneity and unpredictable responses are refreshing, and may serve as rest spots in the tedium of academic structure. Inversely, puppetry can become tedious if overdone, replacing motivation with boredom.

It is recommended that dialogue not be prerecorded. If a sequence of action has been prepared in advance the dialogue will fall in place in natural order.

As the teacher gains confidence, students may be allowed to take turns being the puppeteer. Hopefully, consistency will underline this activity allowing every student an opportunity for self-expression.

As the puppet character emerges, and the puppet is allowed to make mistakes, individual guilt feelings may be replaced with improved feelings of self-worth as the onus is transferred to the symbolic character.

Puppets that moralize and preach do not seem as effective as ones that students can identify with as having faults like theirs.

Expanding the Concept

After the technique becomes comfortable, successful and accepted by the class, the use of puppetry may be expanded. It is possible to imagine a puppet solving mathematical problems at the blackboard; teaching historical concepts; enriching language arts with story telling; drilling students in skills; learning the alphabet - making mistakes and then being corrected by the class. Puppets can write on the board; measure things; put their arm around someone; shake hands; cry; laugh; have sensitive feelings; in short - an entire spectrum of feelings may flow through a puppet.

The gradual addition of new characters gives students time to grasp the individuality of the newcomer. Eventually, these characters could reside in a learning or puppet corner.

The puppet corner could be expanded to include a puppet lending library. Certain puppets may be borrowed overnight. Sometimes this can take the place of a teacher visit to the home if the puppet happens to express the individuality of the teacher. These experiences may serve as foundations for language arts projects. Narrative experiences may be written up and then shared with classmates.

Another expansion possibility is to allow certain times when puppets may be used individually or at times when an aide might be working with students, puppets are excellent surrogate teachers and reinforcements.

Expanding Imagination and Creative Thinking

In live classroom puppetry, what is left out may be more important than what is shown. Adapting guidelines for successful storytelling (Sawyer, The Way of The Storyteller, Viking Press, 1942) will help the novice puppeteer to understand how to appeal to imagery and senses.

If every detail of the storyline is drawn for the audience, it leaves little or no room for mental closure. It is recommended that space be left to allow the imagination of the viewer to expand.

A classic example of this in cartooning is Charles Schultz. We know that there is a Van Gogh in Snoopy's dog house because it has been implied. However, we have never entered the dog house or seen the painting.

The puppeteer opens the window of imagination and lets the audience look out. In their book, The Power of Play, Frank and Theresa Caplan explain:

Many fruitful ideas in science and the arts have been developed by those adults who were unfettered enough to countenance unexplored ideas and translate them into formal programs of action or products. Such adults have retained from childhood a capacity for imagining and creative thinking. They no doubt found their inspiration in "idle fancifying" and "non-logical thinking" - the free play of the mind. Often free play with models occurs when thought or imagination temporarily gives out. Models are the toys of the adult scientist and mathematician who send fantastic machines into outer space and to the moon, areas far removed from the reality of experience. (p.177)

The Caplans continue to explain that play and creativity are synonymous.

Play in childhood supports the experimentation and drive necessary for creative leadership and living in adulthood. Play releases the self and nurtures the imagination. If we would have inventive adults, then parents, teachers and society must provide play settings and the best mix of unstructured and structured play materials that will foster the fullest development of every child. (p. 177)

Balancing the Medium

Critics of incorporating puppetry in the classroom suggest that it is play, recreation, entertainment. If a rationale must be given for puppetry, then it can be argued that simulation and role playing have proven therapeutic value as related to self-concept.

The motifs most commonly delineated in dramatic play fall into the categories of protection, power, attack, and destruction. Children with serious adjustment problems are preoccupied with one motif; well-adjusted children are able to shift from one to another. Some aspects of the child and his world that are stunningly exposed in dramatic play are the specific character of the child's world, his anti-social feelings, what he thinks of himself, and his innermost concerns. Clinical evidence indicates that when children express in fantasy play the hostile emotions they feel, they siphon off their antipathy so it will not be barred to cause inner tension and possibly erupt in real-life situations. (Caplan, p.50)

Puppets permit the child to express thoughts and feelings that more realistic play materials often cannot liberate, and the sharing of his feelings with a group of children can extend his understanding and social contacts. (Caplan, p.51)

The individual who incorporates puppetry into their curriculum ultimately decides how that medium will be used. There are no restrictions or guidelines that codify the limits of puppetry. These are limitations each individual has to decide upon and practice in the classroom.

Some individuals use puppetry in ways that evoke feelings of fear in their audience. When working with disturbed, very young, or highly impressionable children, it is important to weigh their vulnerability to fear.

What needs to be realized is the potential influence of puppetry. Balancing the medium is dependent upon the variables of the classroom setting and the personality of the classroom teacher.

Puppetry: Historical Educational Tool

Puppetry has been used as an educational tool on a world-wide scale for centuries. Often it was combined with magic and mystery to evoke feelings of fear and awe.

American Northwest Indians had highly sophisticated string puppets and masks which were used during tribal ceremonies. (Baird, p.28)

Puppets, marionettes and automata were used for centuries to teach morality plays, Biblical stories and instill awe in the common people. (Boehn, p.2)

From pantomime for a recitation to a starring role in a mystery play was a long step only in time. For the early church, while it frowned on the vulgarity of live actors, was fully aware of the educational value of the theater and the arts "to elevate the common people to knowledge and to show in some palpable form the eternal truths." In order to have the one without the other, it welcomed the puppet. And despite occasional grumbling in high places puppetry became an integral part of medieval religious drama. (Baird, p.66)

Simulation may be seen in a 14th century illustrated manuscript that depicts dueling knights in a hand puppet booth. (Baird, p.62)

Family Sit-Com originated with Punch and Judy three hundred years ago. Originating in the middle east, each country has their own interpretation of Punch. Pulcinella in Italy, Polichinelle in France, Kasper in Germany, PUNCHINELLO, or Punch in England, Petrouchka in Russia, to name a few.

Punch, in flouting petty authority, has been a great spokesman for liberty and many a brave, intelligent Punch man had outwitted all kinds of censors in his audacity. (Baird, p.103)

Language Arts Enrichment has been practised for generations in Sicily as legends and epic poems are reenacted by a culturally unique form of puppetry. Roland, Charlemagne, Saracens, knights and hundreds of other characters have passed on the legends for at least four hundred years, through these four foot eighty pound marionetti. (Baird, pp. 116-129)

Writing, Literature and Drama incorporated puppetry as early as the Greek civilization and possibly earlier.

It is possible, at least not impossible, that in the puppet-show we have before us the most ancient form of dramatic representation. Certain it is that this puppet-show best harmonized with the intelligence of the people at large, for it came to meet the popular conceptions and appealed to their instincts...often a much clearer mirror of the thought and feeling of the people than poetry, and not infrequently, is the bearer of ancient traditions. (Boehn, p.15)

Shakespeare's Hamlet draws an analogy between live actors and marionettes in his instructions to the players.

Faust originated in a street puppet play.

George Sand and her son Maurice entertained friends with puppets. Maurice had a theater in his Paris studio called "Theatre Des Amis."

George Bernard Shaw respected puppetry as an art. He wrote:

I always hold up the wooden actors as instructive object-lessons to our flesh-and-blood players...What really affects us in the theater is not the muscular activities of the performers, but the feelings they awaken in us by their aspect; for the imagination of the spectator plays a far greater part there than the exertions of the actors. The puppet is the actor in his primary form. (Boehn, p.vi)

These are just a few examples from the history of puppetry that confirm puppetry as an educational tool.

U.S.A. 1939

A newsletter published by the Research Center for the Federal Theater Project, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia (Oct. 1976) contains this excerpt pertaining to the depression years:

Perhaps a majority of FTP marionette productions were done, however, not in public theaters, but in schools, hospitals, and institutions for underprivileged children. In his Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, William McDonald states: "Marionettes, more than any other type of productions, were used to divert, to educate, and to entertain physically and mentally ill people; the making and manipulation of the dolls were particularly successful." Hallie Flanagan also noted in Arena that children with crippled hands were taught to operate hand puppets, "thus giving them, under the guise of play, the exercise so painful but so necessary."

Summary

Education, faced with the challenges of increasing technology, must seek innovative ways of implementing humanistic, individualistic concepts representative of a pluralistic society. John Diebold states:

Instruction must become more individualized, especially for the disadvantaged and the particularly gifted. Even the median student develops in different rates in different areas and at different times in his development. The requirement that all proceed together assures boredom in some, a sense of failure in others, and wholly fails to develop the potential of each. (Diebold, p.3)

Puppetry is a two-way communication medium which allows a range of feelings to flow in a socially acceptable way. When attention is focused on the puppet (non-person), the onus is removed from the sender (puppeteer).

As the sender experiences success, improved feelings of self-worth are internalized, raising the self-concept of the individual.

Puppetry takes its place in history as a valuable educational tool. Accepted in other parts of the world as a serious art form, the United States has been reluctant to accept puppetry as more than child's play. The advent of Sesame Street on television has altered this viewpoint somewhat.

Introducing puppetry into the classroom may add a new dimension to the academic structure. In addition to the unlimited possibilities for curriculum enrichment, may be added the psychologically therapeutic value.

Using puppets frees the student to deal symbolically with problems helping them to see things in purer form. Through this clarifying focal lens, students are helped to see themselves and others clearly, putting them in touch with their feelings.

The sensitive careful guidance of the teacher can help students gain greater feelings of self-worth through successful puppet experiences.

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National Executive Office,
Puppeteers of America, Inc.
P.O. Box 1061
Ojai, California 93023